QUENTIN COMPSON and HAMLET: A Primary Source Study

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QUENTIN COMPSON and HAMLET: A STUDY

Quentin's tragedy in *The Sound and the Fury* is, most agree, his inability to accept his sister's promiscuity, especially when taken in combination with his own sexual innocence. On the surface it seems like a classical Freudian dilemma: brother loves his sister but is unable to act himself while she claims her right to satisfaction with others, regarding the selection of whom, she is not particular. This much we grant, but is this scenario really the material of tragedy? The dilemma is more complicated for Quentin: he is the oldest son of the formerly aristocratic Compson family whose eminence in Jefferson, Mississippi had gradually eroded since the Civil War, yet his own sense of decorum and *noblesse oblige* is still somewhat intact. He has difficulty accepting the status quo. His younger brother Benjamin, formerly Maury, is severely mentally impaired, and the one sister, Caddy, with whom he identifies temperamentally and intellectually, has allowed herself to engage in the kind of loose sexual behavior formerly more characteristic of lower classes and slaves.

So distraught is Quentin that, like Hamlet, he contemplates suicide, but unlike Hamlet, he actually follows through, eventually drowning himself in the Charles River after his first year at Harvard. Interestingly, the circumstances that lead Hamlet to a first consideration of suicide in Act I, "That this too, too solid flesh would melt . . . ." are not unlike the considerations responsible for Quentin's own death wish. Hamlet, we recall, confesses to being almost completely disillusioned with his life in a world of which he says, "things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely." Hamlet is demoralized about his mother's hasty remarriage but even more so with her choice of a spouse, namely his uncle whom he describes as a "satyr" compared to the "Hyperion" of his father. He has trouble accepting how she could choose someone like Claudius when the relationship with his own father had been so perfect: "why she would hang on him /As if increase of appetite had grown / By what if fed on." Even more to the point, Hamlet cannot bear to think of the physical intimacy she will now enjoy with Claudius: "Oh, most wicked speed to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets![1]" but for the time he can say nothing: "Break my heart, for I must hold my tongue" (1.2.143-59).

We know that Quentin is obsessed with his sister's sexual escapades which, by the time he is at Harvard, have left her pregnant. Early in the Quentin section we find that there is a formal wedding announcement sent from home which he refuses to open: "*Mr. and Mrs. Jason Richmond Compson announce the marriage of"* (49). This memory for Quentin is blended with the phrase that is used in both the Benjy and Quentin sections to echo Caddy's first fall from innocence*:" She ran right out of the mirror, out of the banked scent. Roses."* Quentin knows the marriage is a sham, but Caddy feels she has no choice: "*Why must you marry somebody Caddy . . . Do you want me to say it do you think*

[11] We know from the historical context that Hamlet uses the word "incestuous" because his mother married his father's brother, a situation that was politically charged because of Henry VIII's argument that his marriage to his brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon, constituted incest and should be annulled.

that if I say it it won't be"(77). Yet Quentin disdains her choice of Herbert Head as a husband, "*Caddy that blackguard Caddy that blackguard Caddy*," (77) pointing out at one point that he was thrown out of school for cheating and ostracized by his friends for cheating at cards. Nor had Quentin been passive regarding Caddy's first lover, Dalton Ames, who was considerably more suave than Herbert Head. Quentin made an appointment to meet Ames at a bridge where he had expected to satisfy the family honor by ordering his sister's ravisher to leave town and adding a personal threat of violence. Such forceful actions, though, are counter to Quentin's temperament and abilities. Ames overpowers him, prevents him from any assault, and sympathetically agrees not to mention the incident again (101).

Similar to his predecessor, Hamlet, Quentin becomes frustrated by his inability to act. Even when he is aware of his sister's sexual trysts occurring on the property around the family home, he is powerless to prevent her and usually can only contemplate, sometimes arguing with Caddy before and afterwards:

> Caddy
> stop it
> I held her
> Im stonger than you
> she was motionless hard unyielding but still
> I wont fight stop youd better stop
> Caddy don't Caddy
> it wont do any good don't you know it wont let me go (97)

Ultimately Quentin has to face up to the fact that his sister has had multiple lovers: "*Have there been very many Caddy . . . I don't know too many will you look after Benjy and Father"* (73). Having at one point attempted a sexual tryst himself with a local girl, Natalie, Quentin is mocked by his sister. The imagery associated with the incident emphasizes the mud and rain*: it's for letting it be some darn town squirt I slapped you. . . I didn't kiss a dirty girl like Natalie anyway* **.** *It was raining. . .* (85). The encounter with Natalie takes place in the mud, an image which harks back to the description of Caddy with the muddy underpants in the Benjy section. For Quentin, female sexuality will always be associated with dirt and moisture, as we see in his subsequent encounter with the little Italian girl near Cambridge.[2] She was holding the coin in her moist dirty hand: "her fingers closed about them [pennies] damp and hot, like worms"(80). Later, in a conversation with Spoade and Shreve in the company of Gerald and their dates, Quentin conjures up yet another disturbing image of his sister with her men:

> 'Did you ever drink perfume?' Spoade said. *with one hand he could lift her to his shoulder and run with her running Running*
> 'No," Shreve said*. running the beast with two backs and she blurred in the winking oars running the swine of Euboeleus running coupled within how many Caddy* (93)

[2] Professor Wai Chee Dimock, "Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury Part II," *Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Faulkner*, Open Yale Courses, ITunes U.

The image of the "beast with two backs" is from *Othello,* a play replete with animal imagery, some of which is appropriated to describe the sexual union ("an old black ram / is tupping your white ewe"-1.1.91-2). The association of sex with animals and hence dirt, harks back to Quentin's childish tryst with Natalie which he protests was only "*dancing sitting down*"(86). Quentin would earlier chide his sister, " *Why wont you bring him to the house, Caddy? Why must you do. . . in the pasture the ditches the dark woods . . .* " (59).

Hamlet also, in his lowest moments, had reflected with disgust on the image of his mother and Claudius in bed together. In the closet scene in Act 3, he confronts her with the hypocrisies associated with marrying someone so unlike his father: "Have you eyes?" he asks. He compares Claudius to a "mildewed ear blasting his wholesome brother," (3.4.64-5) in the comparison of the two portraits. But the image that disturbs Hamlet most is the idea of his mother and Claudius together, "in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed / Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love over the nasty sty—"(90ff). By now, in the interview, Gertrude herself is distraught, begging Hamlet to stop. Yet he cannot resist citing one more painful image. He begs her, upon leaving, not to

> Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed,
> Pinch wanton on your cheek, call you his mouse,
> And let him, for a pair of reechy kisses
> Or paddling in your neck with his damned fingers
> Make you to ravel all this matter out . . . . (3.4.185-9)

Hamlet's disgust with the image of his mother and Claudius in a sexual encounter goes beyond what many like to see as an Oedipus-complex. On one level his point of view represents a desire remove this woman who identified so much with her son ("The Queen, his mother lives almost by his looks"-4.7.12-13) from surroundings including people like Claudius and Polonius who are corrupt in in their own unique ways. Hamlet begs his mother to desist from future encounters, noting that each time she resists, it will become a little easier. Finally, he says, when she is" desirous to be blest / I'll blessing beg of you" (1.4.173).

Quentin's revulsion to female sexuality has repercussions for himself as well. It explains why, at Harvard, he is teased by some classmates for not finding the customary recreation with women. Quentin notes ironically while he broods on the issue: "*Calling Shreve my husband. Ah let him alone, Shreve said, if he's got better sense than to chase after the little dirty sluts, whose business* " (50). Quentin's antipathy to a physical intimacy with women makes it that much more ironic that he is accused of a perverse motive in keeping company with the little Italian girl near Cambridge. His choice is to nurture her and protect her, even though it creates an inconvenience when she refuses to go her own way. Ultimately it is Caddy that he wanted to protect, though, a desire which explains his suggestion, on the eve of her wedding, to run away with him and Benjy, using the money that was allotted for his Harvard tuition: "*listen, we can go away you and Benjy and me where nobody knows us*

where . . . On what your school money the money they sold the pasture for so you could go to Harvard don't you see you've got to finish now. . . . "(79).

In the last analysis, it is this desire to protect Caddy that also explains Quentin's fantasy that he has committed incest. As he explains to Father, "it was to isolate her out of the loud world so that it would have to flee us of necessity and then the sound of it would be as though it had never been." When Father asks Quentin if he actually tried to make her commit the act, this man of inaction, like Hamlet, answers that "I was afraid to I was afraid she might and then it wouldnt have done any good"(112). Incest in Quentin's mind is the only way when a sister and brother are of a higher order and can find no counterpart in "the loud world." In this regard they can be said to be like Wotan's children, Sigmund and Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* because they are a special order of humans. Their end in Wagner is tragic, of course, although the product of their illicit union is the hero, Siegfried. For Quentin, it is a rescue of almost metaphysical stature: " *If it could just be a hell beyond that: the clean flame the two of us more than dead*"(76). Caddy has no such illusions, real or metaphorical, however. She has no intention of running away with Quentin and instead marries Herbert Head, never to return, at least formally, to the Compson home.

Beyond Quentin's obsession with his sister's transgression, however, there is a fair amount of cynicism in the Quentin narrative which also seems to have influenced his decision to take his life. Similarly, *Hamlet* is replete with cynical observations that go beyond the protagonist's struggle to achieve the revenge mandated by the Ghost of his father. Hamlet's disillusion with his mother's indiscretion in marrying Caudius carries over to his observations about women in general: "God gave you one face, and you paint yourselves another. . . (3.1.143). Then again, people will always assume the worst: "be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow," the tells Ophelia, " thou shalt not escape calumny." But also Hamlet claims that it is best to marry a fool, "for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them"(135-9). And rather than devise any means to protect Ophelia from the cruel and hypocritical world as Quentin tries to do for Caddy, Hamlet orders Ophelia to avoid procreation altogether "Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? Get thee to a nunnery"(3.1.)

Pessimism regarding sexual conduct is not unique to Hamlet in the play: Laertes warns his sister that she shouldn't trust Hamlet too far and should fear lest she open her "chaste treasure . . .to his unmastered importunity"(1.3.31-2). Shortly afterward Polonius comes in to warn Ophelia in even more cynical language. Ophelia is a "green girl" if she does not realize that Hamlet is after one thing. As far as "the holy vows of heaven"(109-14) that Hamlet included, for Polonius they nothing more than

> . . . brokers,
> Not of that dye which their investments show
> But mere implorators of unholy suits
> Breathing like sanctified and pious bawds . . . . (126-9)

In general, though, cynicism in *Hamlet* is focused on all realms of human behavior. Hamlet himself nurtures a skeptical view of human communication when he notes, in the graveyard scene: "We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us." People will misinterpret what we say or exploit it

for innuendo. Regarding the social classes, he notes at another point that "the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier he galls his kibe" (5.1.123). And his remark to his mother in the closet scene, suggests his world is universally corrupt: "Forgive me this my virtue, / For in the fatness of these pursy times / Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg" (3.5.155-7).

In Quentin's story, however, this general cynicism is articulated more characteristically by his father in the many conversations they had had. Early in the Quentin narrative, we learn what Father said to him about time when he gave him his Grandfather's watch: "Its rather excrutiating-ly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his fathers" (48). Other comments by Father reemerge in this section about time. Father has suggested that "its always the idle habits you acquire which you will regret," and whereas, Father suggests, religious belief is ultimately possible, Quentin is inclined to think otherwise, for himself at least: "That Christ was not crucified: he was worn away by a minute clicking of little wheels. That had no sister"(49). Father had also told Quentin that "Clocks slay time" and that "only when the clock stops does time come to life"(54). Thus Quentin's breaking the face of his watch and tearing off the hands in a manner which causes him to bleed slightly, prepares us for his symbolic journey to his death later that day.

It is still course his sister who is the focus of Quentin's agony and ultimately his resorting to suicide. Yet Quentin had a number of serious conversations with his father on that subject beforehand , and phrases from that dialogue increase in number and intensity as the section draws to a close. Regarding Caddy's behavior, Quentin's father had some general observations to make. At one point Father reminds him that "*Caddy's a woman too remember. She must do things for women's reasons too"* (59). Quentin is disturbed by things he had heard about Herbert when he was at Harvard, namely his cheating at academics and at cards. Regarding Quentin's habit of spying on Caddy during her sexual escapades on the family property, Father is more sympathetic than his mother. Father replies to his wife's pronouncement that she will "*not have my daughter spied on by you or Quentin or anybody no matter what you think she has done"* with the observation that "*At least you agree there is reason for having her watched."* When Quentin is hurt and confused by his mother's accusation, Father suggests, "*She didn't mean that that's the way women do things it's because she loves Caddy"(*61). At this point Quentin notes, "Father and I protect women from one another from themselves our women"(62).

Father shows more depth and compassion than other characters in the Quentin section, and more than anyone he can sympathize with the code of honor that Quentin can't quite relinquish regarding Caddy's actions. Mrs. Compson, always the martyr, blames Father for everything: *"How can I control any of them when you have always taught them to have no respect for me and my wishes I know you look down on my people* . . . ." It becomes clear, though, that Father does suffer for Caddy's behavior and its impact on the family. As she prepares to leave as the wife of Herbert Head, Caddy pleads with Quentin to look out for Father and Benjy*: Father will be dead in a year they say if he doesn't stop drinking and he wont stop he cant stop since I since last summer and then they'll send Benjy to Jackson. . .* (79). Father has more sensibility as well as the capacity to suffer for Caddy's actions than anyone other than Quentin himself. Yet at one point Father makes an observation about the

complexity of women that, in Quentin's mind, inadvertently, fortifies his association of women with filth:

> Because women so delicate so mysterious Father said. Delicate equilibrium of periodical filth between two moons balanced. Moons he said full and yellow as harvest moons her hips thighs. Outside, outside of them always but. Yellow Feet soles with walking like. They know that some man that all those mysterious and imperious concealed . . . . Liquid putrefaction like drowned things floating like pale rubber flabbily filled getting the odor of honeysuckle all mixed up . (81)

But Quentin's father also attempts to address his son's crisis with Caddy's loss of virginity. "It's because you are a virgin: don't you see?" he asks. He goes on to suggest that

> Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity and I said You cant know and he said Yes. On the instant when we come to realize that tragedy is second-hand. (74)

Father argues that the cause for which Quentin is suffering is more important to him as a cause than it is for Caddy. Along with "tragedy" being "second hand," a thought that is unacceptable to Quentin, Father tends to make other pronouncements which emphasize the meaninglessness of endeavors and sometimes life itself. During the summer of Caddy's marriage to Herbert Head, "that blackguard," Quentin remembers "Man the sum of his climactic experiences Father said. Man the sum of what have you. A problem in impure properties carried tediously to an unvarying nil: stalemate of dust and desire"(78). Later Quentin remembers one of Father's comments about Uncle Maury and the idea "that Father was teaching us that all men are just accumulations stuffed with sawdust swept up from trash heaps where all previous dolls had been thrown away . . . . "(111). We are reminded of Hamlet's comment about "man" being "a quintessence of dust" from his often quoted speech, "What a piece of work is man" (2.2.269). These cynical underpinnings haunt the Quentin narrative and accumulate toward the end. Their emphasis on the seeming futility of life goes even beyond Hamlet's ruminations on mortality in the cemetery in Act 5 of that play: "Here's fine revolution," he observes contemplating skulls in the graveyard, "an we had the trick to see 't"(79-80).

Earlier Father had remarked that virginity "means less to women. . . it was men invented virginity not women"(50). Quentin has difficulty accepting this view—"But to believe it doesn't matter. . . ." and as he progresses toward his crisis we understand that he cannot accept the idea that he will ever get over his sense of the loss and its tragedy. Father argues that, in fact, he will, that it is temporary, so when Quentin explains why he was fixated on the idea of incest, Father explains,

> . . . now this other you are not lying now either but you are still blind to what is in yourself to that part of general truth the sequence of natural events and their causes which shadows every mans brow . . . you are contemplating an apotheosis in which

> a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the flesh and aware both of itself and the flesh it will not quite discard . . . you cannot bear to think that someday it will no longer hurt you like this. . . . (112)

Quentin cannot accede to the view that his misery is temporal, but Father indicates that he does not believe Quentin will take his own life over it:

> the strange thing is that man who is conceived by accident and whose every breath is a fresh cast with the dice already loaded against him will not face that final main which he knows beforehand he has assuredly to face without essaying expedients ranging all the way from violence to petty chicanery . . . . (112)

Father, with his very mechanistic view of things, thinks it is against human nature to make such a choice: "no you will not do that until you come to believe that even she was not quite worth despair perhaps" to which the son replies, "nobody knows what I know" (113). At this impasse, Father can only insist that Quentin head north and take some time in Maine before going to Harvard. His final appeal is one that betrays not his compassion and subtle reasoning but rather his Southern gentility: "remember that for you to go to Harvard has been your mothers dream since you were born and no compson has ever disappointed a lady" (113). Quentin replies that this is "temporary" as well.

The final words of Father's counsel to his son are recalled before Quentin leaves his dorm room for the last time. To the suggestion that he go to Harvard in any case, Quentin says cryptically, "it will be better for me for all of us," leading Father to observe, "every man is the arbiter of his own virtues but let no man prescribe for another mans wellbeing." When Quentin once again articulates the word "temporary" in response, Father notes that it "was the saddest word of all there is nothing else in the world its not despair until time its not even time until it was" (113). Without being aware of it, possibly, Father appears to acquiesce to Quentin's suicide, the preparations for which are described in the subsequent and last paragraph of the Quentin section. Quentin cleans the blood off of this shirt, brushes his teeth and grabs his hat before leaving to drown himself in the river.

Ultimately we can argue that Quentin's tragedy is not cathartic as Hamlet's is. Although Hamlet also dies at the end of his play, he has managed to come to a new understanding of things and, if he himself must die from Claudius' treachery, he is anxious for his friend and witness, Horatio, to tell his story "aright" to the world. Hamlet has wrestled with the awareness of time as well, and it is only in Act 5 scene 2 that he comes to accept that he cannot control every outcome:

> . . . we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow.
> If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now,
> yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows,
> what is it to leave betimes. Let be. [3] (5.2. 190-93).

In spite of the painful recognition of human mortality in the graveyard scene , "To what base ends we may return," (5.1.182) Hamlet is now willing to trust providence and to enter the duel with Laertes, not knowing how it will end. In contrast to the preoccupations earlier in the play which rendered him indecisive, Hamlet now is no longer tyrannized by time and accepts his fate without attempting to manipulate events.

Quentin, however, cannot stop counting the seconds and minutes. He thinks about one of his Father's last comments regarding the "dark diceman" to whom " the despair or remorse or bereavement is not particularly important" (112). Not content to "Let be," as Hamlet is,Quentin does manipulate what events he can as he methodically cleans his clothes and completes all the necessary mundane rituals of grooming before leaving to jump in the river. The only way for Quentin to rescue his tragedy from time and to make it more than "temporary" is to take his own life.

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[3] Interestingly, Faulkner alludes to this same passage about the sparrow from Matthew 10:29 but not until the Jason section, April Sixth, 1928, page 154.